**The Cost of Freedom**

**Galatians 5:13-14**

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 Ahhh...Memorial Day Weekend!   Burgers on the grill. Church family camp. Long lines on US23. Time to plant the garden. It is the official start to summer - the gateway into three months of warmth, vacation, and fun.  But, of course, this is much more than a three day weekend - it is a time set aside to remember and give thanks for those who gave their lives serving our country.

But, here’s a little secret of my trade.  For many pastors, the planning of Memorial Weekend worship is fraught with anxiety.  In our increasingly polarized society, the relationship between church and state gets ever more complex and the potential for offending or hurting someone in worship ever greater.  War and peace, church and nation, politics and religion - these are topics that bring out our passion, our loyalty, and, often, our conflicts. As Peanuts cartoonist Charles Schulz once said, “There are three things I’ve learned never to discuss with people - religion, politics, and the Great Pumpkin”.

Yet, at their cores, democracy and Christianity share some basic, common values - one of which is freedom. Freedom is woven into the very fabric of our nation. The freedom of religion.  Freedom of speech. Freedom to hold fair elections. The many freedoms we take for granted that have been protected by the people we honor and thank this weekend.

 Freedom is equally important as we seek to learn from and grow in Christ.  But that begs the question, what do we mean by freedom in a Christian context?  If freedom as a country means freedom of religion and of the press, freedom of speech and freedom to elect our government, what does it mean to talk about Christian freedom?

 Jesus spoke often about freedom to his disciples, helping them to recognize that each of us has inner wounds and struggles that keep our spirits bound, that hold us back from growing into the fullness of who God created us to be.  In John 8 he says, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.” So, then, what is the truth? This suggests that the truth is what his disciples have learned from him - his word, his teachings, his commandments.  When asked which is the greatest commandment, Jesus taught, “to love God with all your heart, your soul, and your mind and to love your neighbor as yourself.” Just before his death, Jesus gave a new commandment to “love one another as I have loved you”. It seems as though the truth is that we are made to love and that love will set us free.  Of course, the obvious follow up question is “free from what?”

 So many of us struggle to love - to love ourselves, to love those who have hurt us, to love those who are different from us.  When Jesus speaks of being free, he means free from sin or, more accurately, from the power of sin in our lives. If we understand sin to be those behaviors or choices that stand between us and love, between us and a healthy, right relationship with God and with each other, then to be free from sin is to be free of those behaviors and choices.  To be able to start again, to let go of the past and our past mistakes, and begin again in our relationship with God. To be free of sin is to give over our insecurities, our fears, our addictions, our bad decisions, and our mistakes to God and trust that we can let them go. We can move on.

 So, what do you need to be free from?  What stands between you and loving, between you and God, between you and becoming your best self?  What habit or behavior or thought pattern or shame do you allow to limit you from being fully loved by God and fully free?  It may be materialism or some other kind of addiction. It may be a prejudice or fear you have about someone or group of people you experience as “other”.   It may be insecurity - your inability to see your own value and beauty. It may be a lifetime habit of holding back your own voice or putting yourself down. What do you need to be free of?

And, what do will you do with that freedom?  As poet Mary Oliver puts it in her poem, *A Summer’s Day,* “What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”  How will you love as completely as you can and put that love to deed and action?

 In his letter to the Galatians, Paul takes the question of Christian freedom in a slightly different direction.  He declares that we have been set free by Christ for freedom. And, specifically, that is freedom from strict adherence to the Jewish law.  The Galatian community had never been Jewish; they had never followed the Jewish laws set down in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. They were pagans brought to Christianity by Paul and his followers.  However, Paul and the other disciples disagreed about whether these non-Jewish converts should become Jews before becoming Christians. Should they be required to follow the Jewish laws, particularly the law of circumcision?  Much of the book of Galatians is about just that discussion. Paul makes very clear that Christ sets us free from strict adherence to those laws. We are not to be slaves to the laws anymore than slaves to sin. And again, Paul says, there is one law which supersedes all the others- “you shall love your neighbor as yourself”.

 Christian freedom is the freedom to love.  To love with the kind of complete, non-judgmental, fully-accepting, unconditional love for all people that Jesus modeled for us.

 I think this speaks to the heart of the conflict within our denomination right now.  As a denomination, the United Methodist Church has recently voted to prioritize law over love.  They have chosen to focus their biblical interpretation on the laws found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.   Yet, the spirit of Jesus’ teachings, and of Paul’s, is that adhering too strictly to the law binds us, constrains us, and limits us in how and whom we love.  Jesus taught that the 613 laws found in the book of Leviticus are secondary to the commandment that we love one another, and love is the lens through which we interpret those laws.  Just as Paul argued that the law of circumcision inhibited the Galatians’ from growth in faith and love, I believe the laws in Leviticus related to homosexuality inhibit us.

 In 2007, long before I came here, this congregation voted by more than 90% to pass the welcoming statement we print every week in our bulletin - to show clearly and consistently that we seek to love and welcome everybody.

Over the last few weeks, I have had many, many conversations about the future of the United Methodist church and about the future of our congregation in particular.  One thing I have said over and over again is that I truly believe on the other side of the mess United Methodism is in, this church - and all United Methodist Churches, both conservative and progressive - will be free to be who we feel called to be, to do the ministry that God is calling us to, and to fully welcome into our church, our sanctuary and our pulpit whomever God sends us.

  I believe this church is bursting with love for the world and for all God’s children and that, in this case, the new law of the church, the stricter controls laid out in the traditional plan, are binding us, limiting us, holding us back.  I look forward to the day when all this love we have bursts out of these walls, out of the constraints of the traditional plan, and into the world. And I believe that day will come soon.

Yet, one thing we know, and Memorial Day reminds us of, is that freedom comes at a cost.  Christian freedom, the freedom to love, comes with responsibility and challenges. As you consider your own life, your own heart, what is the cost of freedom for you?  If freedom is letting go of fear or shame, the cost may be facing those feelings directly. If freedom is no longer grieving for a broken relationship, the cost may be taking the first step toward forgiveness.  If freedom is learning to love the unlovable, the cost may be finding a courage you didn’t know you had.

And I can ask the same question for us as a congregation.  If freedom is living out our welcoming statement and embodying the gospel as we understand it, what is the cost?  There are going to be times in the coming months when we are called to be courageous, to take a stand that could get uncomfortable.  There will be times when we are called to be patient, to slow down, so we can be smart, think clearly, choose wisely. There are going to be times when we don’t agree with each other, and we are called to love and to listen openly.  And there will be times when we are asked to give more - more of our time, our talents, our finances, our service and our witness to strengthen this church for the journey ahead.

As we remember on this day - no freedom comes without cost.  Not political freedom or societal freedom or cultural freedom or personal freedom or spiritual freedom.  And yet, the reward, the potential for living out fully God’s call upon your life, God’s call upon this church, is worth our prayer, our effort, our patience and persistence.

On Memorial Day weekend, we give thanks for those who gave their lives or the lives of their family members in service to the freedom of our country.  In this congregation, we remember and celebrate the lives of the saints whose love built this building and created the community we call our congregation.  Perhaps as Christians, we can take this opportunity to face squarely all that binds us - as individuals and as a community of faith - and trust that the God of love will lead us to freedom.

May it be so. Amen.